

## Problem and Issue: The Role of the German Army

The German army played a very important role in the government of Germany during the period of the republic. So important, indeed, that the historian E. H. Carr said the Weimar Republic provided a facade for the rule of the General Staff and big business.

Between 1918 and 1920 the army was able to gain a powerful position in the new state. By his offer of support for the government against the left (the Ebert–Groener Pact), General Groener was able to stop attempts to reform the officer corps and create a republican militia.

The organisation of the Free Corps in December 1918 created a force of right-wing nationalists, armed at the expense of the state. The Free Corps was committed not to supporting the government, but to subduing communists and radical socialists, many of whom had been potential allies of the new republic. The independence of the Free Corps and the unreliability of the army were clearly demonstrated by the Kapp *Putsch*. Because of continuing left-wing opposition, however, the government did not feel strong enough to bring the army into line.

As a result of the Kapp *Putsch* the army strengthened its independent position. Both General Reinhardt, who had called on the army to support the government, and Minister Noske were sacked. Reinhardt was replaced by General von Seeckt, who had refused to call out the army against Kapp and the Free Corps units.

### HISTORIANS' DEBATE

Historians vary in their interpretation of the role played by Seeckt. The liberal historians of the 1950s and 1960s, including K. D. Bracher and the more left-wing F. L. Carsten, attacked the Reichswehr and its activities. They accused it of weakening the democratic system, and of developing a 'state within a state', which pursued its policies independently of the government. An alternative, conservative view, held by Meier-Welcker, claims that the army came to terms with the republic and would have supported it in the early 1930s if the government had been more sympathetic to the army and its needs.

More recently research has taken a different direction. In the 1970s A. Hillgruber and M. Geyer concentrated on the period after Seeckt's dismissal in 1926 and the growth of the idea of 'strong government': the fusion of the military with the civilian elements to create a 'Wehrstaat', or military authoritarian government. M. Geyer pointed out that this policy demanded a compromise between the republican government and the Reichswehr leaders, so the liberal analysis of a 'state within a state' has been directly challenged. This new work does not suggest, however, that the increased role of the army was necessary, and indeed E. Kolb emphasises the malign influence of the army on the republic:

*Important results of earlier research are still relevant; for example, evidence of the marked hostility of army leaders to the constitutional form of parliamentary democracy. The political aims and ambitions of the Reichswehr chiefs, and their consequent manoeuvres in 1929–1932, which*

### LIBERAL ANALYSIS

### GROWTH OF IDEA OF 'STRONG GOVERNMENT'

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were in no way forced by events, were factors of the first rank in the disruption of the Weimar Republic and must not be lost to view.

E. Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1988, p. 156.

## ARMY INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT

Although Seeckt encouraged the army to be 'non-political', the most senior officers came to play an increasing role in cabinet decisions. This influence developed for a number of reasons and the structure of cabinet was of the first importance. Ministers were chosen by the chancellor and were not necessarily members of the Reichstag. The president also attended cabinet meetings. Noske's replacement as minister of defence was Gessler, and it was his job to control and direct the armed forces. He tended to be dominated, however, by Seeckt who took to attending cabinet meetings, where he was able to gain direct access to the president. Thus close links were developed between the Reichswehr leaders and the president, which enabled army leaders to influence the president. This influence was exercised, particularly after 1930, over the president's choice of chancellors. In spite of this influence the Reichswehr leaders were not responsible to the Reichstag.

As time went on this influence increased. President Ebert died in 1925 and the aged General von Hindenburg was elected president, a symbol of the old Germany and of right-wing, nationalist aspirations. Although careful to follow the letter of the constitution, he could not help but be opposed to the spirit of republican democracy. He was sympathetic to the ideas of 'strong', non-party government, canvassed by some members of the armed forces.

General von Seeckt was replaced by Heye in 1926, but the policies and methods he had developed remained the same. Indeed, with further personnel changes the role of the army in government increased. In 1928 the civilian minister of defence, Gessler, was replaced by General Groener. Groener relied for advice and support on General von Schleicher, of the Wehrmacht (war) department, and Schleicher became increasingly important. In 1932 he was responsible for the dismissal of both Interior and Defence Minister Groener himself and of Chancellor Brüning. Finally, in the last days of the republic his plotting was partly responsible for putting Hitler into power. This period is covered in more detail in the following chapter.

LINKS BETWEEN  
ARMY AND  
PRESIDENT

PRESIDENT  
HINDENBURG  
OPPOSED TO SPIRIT  
OF DEMOCRACY

IMPORTANT ROLE  
PLAYED BY  
GENERAL VON  
SCHLEICHER

## SUMMARY POINTS

- 1 The German army played an important role in the government of Germany between 1918 and 1929:
  - i the Ebert-Groener Pact saved the army from reform
  - ii the Free Corps opposed the government in the Kapp Putsch
  - iii the army did not support the government against Kapp.
- 2 Historians disagree over the level of independence achieved by the army from the government.
- 3 Seeckt gained undue influence in the government; army influence continued after his resignation.
- 4 Recent research stresses the period after 1926:
  - i the army encouraged the growth of 'strong government'
  - ii the army was an important factor in undermining the republic
  - iii General von Schleicher played a significant part in this process.

QUESTION  
BASED ON  
PROBLEM  
ISSUE

CULTURAL  
ARTISTIC  
FLOWERING

## SOURCE

*Central panel of  
1927-8 triptych  
by Otto Dix, showing  
fashionable life  
in the 1920s.*

SOURCE  
QUESTION